

LETTING UNCLE SAM DO IT

A contribution from the Wilson Ornithological Club Conservation Committee

Some recent actions by the 1953 General Assembly of the State of Indiana should be of general interest, not because of their approach to wildlife conservation problems, but because of the broader implication for conservation philosophy. A bill for repeal of veterans' free hunting permits was defeated. Also defeated were several bills for taking the Conservation Department out of politics. However, a bill providing for a statewide fox bounty was passed and promptly became law. No other conservation bills of major importance were acted upon.

The actions of this legislature have deprived a major segment of Indiana's sportsmen from personal participation in conservation—at least so far as their license dollar might go in wildlife's behalf. There is no good reason why every sportsman should not pay his own way. But proponents of repeal of the free hunting permits stressed that more licenses sold would automatically mean more federal aid money through Pittman-Robertson funds, and, *a priori*, more and better hunting and fishing in Indiana. Defeat of this bill by hasty politics merely postponed further attempts for two years when the Assembly will meet again. Meanwhile enough energy was spent in the last two years' campaigning for repeal to have planted a million pine trees; but no one thought of planting pine trees. The real point is that legislators, administrators, and John Q. Citizen seem more willing to bet their stake on continuing federal help than on developing a program wherein each person has a part to play.

This lack of individual responsibility for wildlife conservation is again reflected by passage of a fox bounty law. The only premise of this law reads, "Foxes are hereby declared to be detrimental to the wild life of the State . . ." This legalistic declaration is contrary to the findings reported by the Indiana Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Research Project which showed that county fox bounties paid from 1875 to 1948 had no demonstrable effect upon fox populations. Fox food habits studies by the same project failed to show that foxes limit Indiana quail and rabbit populations. Some other states have handled their predator problems with trapper-trainee programs which placed the responsibility on the landowner by making him a participator. Ironically, some legislators who ignored Pittman-Robertson research findings in voting for the bounty in Indiana also voted for repeal of the veterans' permits. A vote for repeal was in effect a vote for more federal aid! The lack of a consistent conservation policy is not unique to Indiana for all too widely there is a growing tendency to "let Uncle Sam do it"—and then ignore research facts stemming from his aid, even when these facts are desperately needed in establishing state legislation. In spite of the vast accumulation of technical knowledge gained through the P-R program, Michigan, Wisconsin, and many other states continue their fox bounties as a means of "control."

It is really not so amazing that we have failed to arouse public sentiment to challenge questionable legislative actions. Annual contacts with 4-H youth and adults in conservation camps by one of the authors show that in general the youngsters and teachers share the same beliefs about wildlife: a widespread opinion that game and fur species alone are valuable or worthy of conservation. Predators and non-game species are commonly unknown or despised, and the principles of ecology and wildlife conservation are rarely understood. On the other hand, nearly all seem to be familiar with game farming and to everyone the words "Pittman-Robertson" have a familiar ring. The tragedy is that something basic is still lacking.

Leopold had a phrase for it—"ecological conscience." In explanation he wrote, "The only progress that counts is that on the actual landscape of the back forty, and here we are slipping two steps backward for each stride forward"

"We have not asked the citizen to assume any real responsibility. We have told him that if he will vote right, obey the law, join some organization, and practice what conservation is profitable on his own land, that everything will be lovely; the government will do the rest.

"The formula is too easy to accomplish any thing worthwhile. It calls for no effort or sacrifice; no change in our philosophy of values. It entails little that any decent, intelligent person would not have done of his own accord" (Bulletin of the Garden Clubs of America, September, 1947).

Can we rely solely upon federal help to develop in our people an ecological conscience? Is this a place to "let Uncle Sam do it"? We believe not. And this is in spite of the fact that P-R funds have provided the greatest impetus for wildlife research and development that this country has ever enjoyed. Their accomplishments are both spectacular and essential. A mere glance into the annual reports invites the wonder of any sportsman. Gratifying benefits are received as well by non-game species from land acquisition and management. Any student can aspire to be a P-R project leader or become known as an expert on one or another species. But this is the question we would like to raise, "Is federal aid substituting for individual thought and action?" Along with the patches of restored habitat and reams of slick paper publications are today's sportsmen and youth also made aware of the need for their personal activity? Or do they, from sheer volume of money spent, projects completed, and publications listed, think federal aid and wildlife conservation are synonymous? In short will they be "for" conservation but against participation as long as Uncle Sam can do it?

In our own minds, in those of our teachers and leaders, and in those of our children we must guard against substituting subsidy for an ecological conscience.—CHARLES M. KIRKPATRICK AND WILLIAM H. ELDER.